

## CHAPTER 2

# THE ARGUMENT FROM THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM

*“I tried to understand it, but it was toil in my eyes.”*

(Ps 73:16)

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Suppose one wanted to prove that Yahweh does, in fact, exist. In order to do this, one must first construct a general profile of the nature and attributes of the deity. It is not sufficient to affirm or deny the existence of a god without first stating what kind of god one is talking about (cf. also Fretheim 1984:01). Virtually all arguments for or against the existence of a particular divine reality are of relative value, as a quite specific divine nature must be presupposed. Change the profile, and a particular proof that the deity does or does not exist becomes obsolete.

Yet it is already here – in what should merely be the preliminary stage of ontological reconstruction – where realism starts to come apart at the seams. The reason for the consternation is, according to the devil’s advocate, the plethora of contradictory representations of Yahweh in the Old Testament (cf. Carroll 1991:44).

Even conservatives acknowledge that the fact that there appear to be mutually exclusive characterisations of the deity, differing in terms of his nature, attributes, acts and will (cf. Haley 1992:55-90). If this is the case, the first problem for any realist position regarding the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament can be said to pertain to the phenomenon of *theological contradictions* in the text. In other words, if someone would set out to prove that Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament actually exists, the anti-realist might respond with the sceptical question, “Which version?”

Most Old Testament scholars, however, have taken cognisance of the particular dilemma. It is not uncommon to encounter discussions within Old Testament theology featuring concepts like “pluralism” (cf. Fretheim 1984:04; Brueggemann 1997:61), “diversity” (cf. Goldingay 1982:01, Hanson 1982:01), “contradictions” (cf. Carroll 1991:44), “discrepancies” (cf. Haley 1992:01), differences (cf. Coote & Coote 1996:21) and “inconsistencies” (cf. Patrick 1981:22) when referring to the incoherent characterisation of Yahweh in the text. Whatever one’s choice of designation, there seems to be a general consensus among critical scholars that the Old Testament is filled depictions of Yahweh that cannot be harmonised with each other.

In this chapter, attention will be paid to the possible anti-realist ontological implications of the alleged contradictory depictions of Yahweh in the Old Testament texts. If there are contradictory versions of Yahweh then, obviously, not all can correspond to the same supposedly existing extra-textual phenomenon. While it is logically and theoretically possible that all versions of mutually exclusive sets of claims could be fictitious, it is also true that, if one of the depictions happens to be factual, those that contradict it are necessarily fictitious.

## **2.2 THEOLOGICAL PLURALISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **2.2.1 Examples of theological contradictions pertaining to Yahweh’s nature**

What is Yahweh like? What are the essential attributes of the divine being the texts are supposed to witness to? In answer to these questions, one only need to engage in a comparative analysis of the various profiles of the deity constructed in the different books of the Old Testament. As the following examples from a synchronic approach to the Old Testament show, the texts are not consistent on this topic and contradictory claims regarding the nature and attributes of Yahweh abound:

A Yahweh who is the only God (cf. 2 Kgs 5:15, Isa 45:5, etc.)

A Yahweh who is not the only God (cf. Gen 3:22; Judg 11:24, Ps 82:1, 97:7, etc.)

A Yahweh who is practically omniscient (cf. Ps 139; Isa 40-55; Prov 15:11, etc.)

A Yahweh who is not omniscient (cf. Gen 18:21, 22:12; Deut 8:2, 13:8; etc.)

A Yahweh who knows the future (cf. Gen 15; Isa 40-55; Ps 139; Dan 1-12; etc.)

A Yahweh who does not know the future (cf. Gen 1-11, 18; Job 1-2; Jon 3; etc.)

A Yahweh who changes his mind and repents (cf. Gen 6; Ex 32; Num 14; Am 7; etc.)

A Yahweh who does not change his mind and repent (cf. Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29, etc.)

A Yahweh who is responsible for all evil (cf. Isa 45:7; Lam 3:17; Am 3:8; etc.)

A Yahweh who is not responsible for all evil (cf. Gen 6,18; Ps 82; Mal 1-3; etc.)

A Yahweh who frequently appears to people (cf. Gen 2-36, Ex 1-40; etc.)

A Yahweh who seldom or never appears to people (cf. Eccl 1-12; Esther; etc.)

A Yahweh who has human form (cf. Gen 1:26; 18; 32; Dan 7:9; etc.)

A Yahweh who is nothing like humans (cf. Deut 4:12; Job 10:4; etc.)

A Yahweh who needs to sleep or rest (cf. Gen 2:2-3; Ex 31:17; cf. also Ps 44:24; etc.)

A Yahweh who never sleeps or rests (cf. Ps 121:4; Isa 40:28; etc.)

A Yahweh who is merely a national deity (cf. Deut 4:19; Judg 11:24; Ps 147:20, etc.)

A Yahweh who is a universal deity (cf. Amos 9:17; Dan 1-12; Job 1; Mal 1:11; etc.)

A Yahweh who is not omnipresent (cf. Gen 4:16, 11:5, 18:21; 1 Kgs 19:11-12, etc.)

A Yahweh who is omnipresent (cf. Ps 139:7-10; Jer 23:23-24; etc.)

A Yahweh who is sovereign, in control and fearless (cf. Isa 40-55; etc.)

A Yahweh who is unsure of himself and afraid (cf. Gen 11:6, 18:17; etc.)

In each case, not all of the differing depictions can be harmonised (cf. Carroll 1991:38,47). Contrary to prima facie assessments, the devil's advocate's juxtaposing of such contradictory claims is not the result of the sort of biblicism among laity where passages of the Bible have been decontextualised by ignoring their temporal and rhetorical context in scripture. Rather, as listed here, the contradictions bear

witness either to deconstructive intra-biblical polemics or, alternatively, to the failure of the formative religious communities to discern the mutually exclusive representations of Yahweh in the sacred texts they canonised (or both).

The devil's advocate's decision to juxtapose the discrepancies in this fashion was therefore merely an economical way of saying what is often said in much longer and more complex exegetical discussions. It would certainly have been impractical to provide a detailed commentary on every passage. Readers are more than welcome to ascertain for themselves whether the particular contexts in which the listed passages feature had been ignored or not. Of course, it is to be expected that both conservative and critical readers will find their own ways of harmonising the contradictions or downplaying their significance.

If the devil's advocate's interpretation of the texts in question is correct, the ontological implications of the contradictions should be spelled out. The same Yahweh cannot be both wholly omniscient yet need to obtain information he lacks. The same Yahweh cannot be both omnipresent and at the same time need to literally descend and ascend in order to travel to certain localities. The same Yahweh cannot be both invisible to human eyes and at times speak with people face to face. The same Yahweh cannot be, in the same sense, both the only god and one amongst many others.

The reality of such basic contradictions regarding Yahweh's nature inevitably leads the consistent philosophical-critical interpreter to one of either three possible conclusions:

1. Yahweh who is x exists and the Yahweh who is not x does not.
2. Yahweh who is not x exists while the Yahweh who is x does not.
3. No Yahweh exists at all.

Whichever of the alternatives one opts for, realism with regard at least some of the depictions of Yahweh in the text collapses. For the purposes of this chapter, it is not yet necessary to choose between the mutually exclusive depictions. The reader simply needs to take cognisance of the fact that, given the presence of contradictions

regarding the nature and attributes of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text, one or more of the two mutually exclusive representations of the deity have no basis in extra-textual reality.

### 2.2.2 Examples of theological contradictions pertaining to Yahweh's actions

The problem of contradictory depictions of Yahweh can also be seen when one attempts to reconstruct a record of the deity's alleged actions in the world (cf. Friedman 1987:222). The following are examples of mutually exclusive views pertaining to exactly what it is that Yahweh had done in the past:

- Contradictory creation accounts (e.g. Gen 1 vs. Gen 2 vs. Ps 74 / Job 26; Job 38-40; Isa 43 vs. Jer 51 vs. Prov 8 vs. Ps 90)
- Contradictory accounts of the first revelation of the divine name (e.g. Gen 4:26 vs. Ex 6:3 vs. Josh 24)
- Contradictory claims regarding the deity's causal relation and exact actions in certain scenarios (e.g. 2 Sam 24:1 vs. 1 Chron 21:1)
- Contradictory claims regarding the ways in which Yahweh relate to and intervene in the human world (e.g. Gen 1-35; Jon 1-4 vs. Eccl 1-12)
- Contradictory views of Yahweh regarding the establishment of the cult during the desert wanderings (e.g. Ex 12-40; Lev 1-27 vs. Jer 7:22)
- Contradictory relations between Yahweh and the forces of chaos (.e.g. Leviathan) (cf. Ps 74:14 vs. Ps 104:26 vs. Isa 27:1)
- Contradictory *ipsissima verba* of the dialogues that Yahweh allegedly engaged in (e.g. the so-called "Ten Commandments" in Ex 20 vs. Ex 34 vs. Deut 5)
- Contradictory envisioned future actions of Yahweh (e.g. Isa 65-66; vs. Eccl 1:4-9,

3:15; vs. Dan 11-12)

- Contradictory relations between Yahweh and the dead (e.g. Genesis, Deuteronomy; Pss 6:4-5, 88:10-12; Isa 38:18-19 vs. 1 Sam 28 vs. Pss 49, 73, Isa 14, 26; vs. Dan 12 vs. Eccl 9:10)

These are but a few examples of the discrepant views in the texts pertaining to the supposed actions of Yahweh in the world and in the lives of people. Numerous additional examples of contradictions pertaining to historical issues will be discussed in the argument from fictitious history (cf. chapter 8).

Once again, not all the depictions can be factual. If Yahweh exists at all, he either made animals and plants before humans (cf. Gen 1:11-27) or he made a human before he made the plants and animals (cf. Gen 2:7-25). Yahweh either destroyed the Leviathan long ago (cf. Ps 74:14) or he simply created it as a playmate (cf. Ps 104:26) or he will kill it in the future (cf. Isa 27:1). He either made an underworld of conscious denizens (cf. Isa 14:9-10) or he made one where the dead know nothing (cf. Eccl 9:5-6). Yahweh either commanded that the Sabbath should be kept in remembrance of creation (cf. Ex 20:10-11), to call to mind the redemptive act of the exodus (cf. Deut 5:13-15), or merely for regeneration (cf. Ex 34:21) – but not all at the same time.

It is as simple as that. Though some might think such an emphasis on technicalities is pedantic, the law of non-contradiction applies here too. Even if this is denied because it is claimed that literary fiction does not always strictly adhere to the need for logical consistency, realism has not been salvaged. To be sure, realism is destroyed by the acknowledgement that what we are dealing with is fiction rather than history (as it was supposedly originally intended).

If the Old Testament deity does have an extra-textual counterpart then either the Yahweh who did x exists, and the version of Yahweh who did not do x does not, or vice-versa. Alternatively, Yahweh does not exist at all. Whichever of the depictions one opts for, it spells the end of realism concerning all the other depictions that stand in a mutually exclusive relation to the preferred version of the deity's acts.

As was the case in the previous section, such a deconstruction of realism pertaining to at least some of the representations of Yahweh, is not enough in itself to invalidate realism completely. Yet the implied invalidation of realism regarding the depictions of Yahweh in some texts can be reckoned as being yet one more additional and significant element in the devil's advocate's cumulative argument against the existence of Yahweh-as-depicted in the text.

### **2.2.3 Examples of theological contradictions pertaining to Yahweh's will**

Another variety of theological contradictions pertains to the ethical dimension of the Old Testament's depictions of the deity whose existence it takes for granted. But what exactly is the will of Yahweh? What does he consider to be right and wrong? In an attempt to supply an answer to these questions, the astute reader not blinded by dogma will encounter a host of contradictory views that defy harmonisation (contra Haley 1992:219-311).

The following examples of some of the many ethical contradictions should suffice to prove the point:

Yahweh considers it right that children should be punished for the sins of parents (cf. Gen 3:16-19; 9:22; Ex 20:5; 2 Sam 21:1; etc.)

Yahweh considers it wrong that children should be punished for the sins of parents (cf. Deut 24:16; Ezek 18:4, etc.)

Yahweh demands that worship be centralised and limited to one particular place (cf. Deut 12:5ff)

Yahweh does not demand centralised worship confined to one particular place (cf. Ex 20:20-24; Judges; Samuel-Kings)

Yahweh will never allow Moabites into his congregation (cf. Deut 23:3; Neh 13:24)

Yahweh will allow Moabites into the congregation (cf. Ruth 1-4)

Yahweh approves of Jehu's killings (cf. 2 Kgs 10)

Yahweh denounces Jehu's killings (cf. Hos 1:4)

Yahweh commanded the burning of children (cf. Ezek 20:20-27)

Yahweh did not command the burning of children (cf. Jer 7:31)

Yahweh wanted the people to have a king (cf. Deut 17:14-15)

Yahweh did not want the people to have a king (cf. 1 Sam 8:5-8)

Yahweh does not want the king of his people to be rich (cf. Deut 17:16-17)

Yahweh wants his chosen king to be rich (cf. 1 Sam 8:17; 1 Kgs 3:13)

Yahweh forbids eunuchs to ever enter into his congregation (cf. Deut 23:1)

Yahweh does not forbid eunuchs to ever enter into his congregation (cf. Isa 56:3)

It is forbidden to marry a sister or brother who had a different mother (cf. Lev 18:9)

It is not forbidden to marry a sister or brother who had a different mother (cf. Gen 20:12; 2 Sam 13:13)

Yahweh specifically tells Moses he wants a bullock to be offered for the sins of the congregation (cf. Lev 4:14)

Yahweh specifically tells Moses it is a he-goat that must be offered for the sins of the congregation (cf. Lev 9:3; Num 15:24)

Yahweh specifies that Levites can begin to serve in the temple at age 25 (cf. Num 8:24)

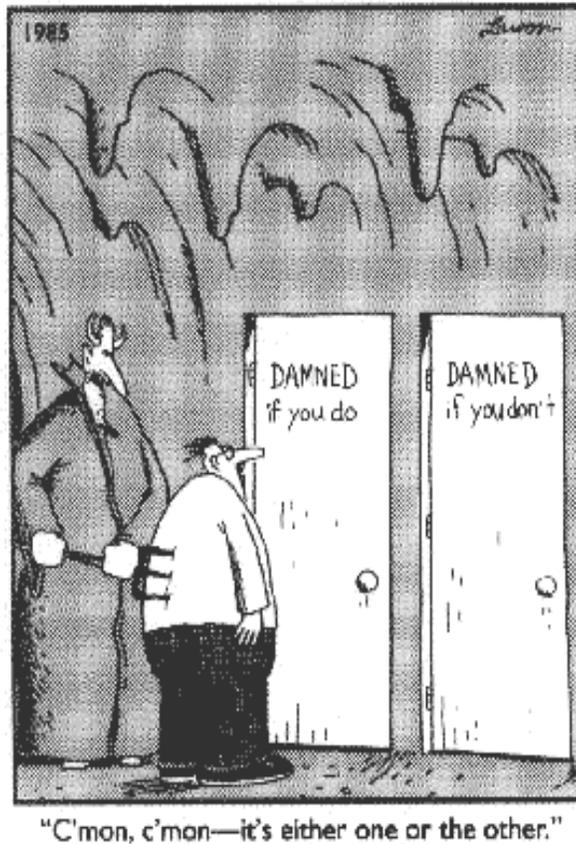
Yahweh specifies that Levites can begin to serve in the temple at age 30 (cf. Num 4:23)

Yahweh is extremely concerned with moral virtue and piety (cf. Prov 1-9)

Yahweh is not extremely concerned with moral virtue and piety (cf. Eccl 5-9)

Given the reality of these discrepancies, the devil's advocate considers realism in Old Testament theology to be unjustified and its ontological perspective deconstructed. Either Yahweh considers it appropriate to punish children for the sins of their fathers (cf. Gen 3:16-19; 9:22; etc.) or he does not (cf. Deut 24:16; Ezek 18:4; etc.). Yahweh either condoned Jehu's blood bath (cf. 2 Kgs 10) or he did not (cf. Hos 1:4). The deity

either accepts Moabites in his congregation (cf. Ruth 1-4) or he does not (cf. Deut 23:1). Alternatively, maybe there is no Yahweh and neither of the opposing viewpoints bears any relation to extra-textual reality whatsoever.



Either Yahweh who is for x is real or Yahweh who is against x is real. Both cannot be true, but both can be false if Yahweh himself does not exist. For the present, however, if one does not wish to accept the latter conclusion then the only option is to pick and choose between the mutually exclusive views. Whichever of these depictions of Yahweh one opts for, if consistency means anything, one must conclude that the opposing depiction is not true and therefore Yahweh-as-depicted therein is not real.

#### **2.2.4 The deconstruction of realism via theological pluralism from the perspective of tradition criticism**

Another way to provide a perspective on the deconstruction of realism via theological contradictions involves something other than synchronically pitting selected texts

against each other. In order to deconstruct realism one may also approach the issue *diachronically* and consider the ontological implications of the way the traditions about the nature, acts and will of the deity Yahweh developed in the history of the Hebrew people. In other words, one may be able to demonstrate that realism regarding the ontological status of Yahweh is problematic by spelling out the ontological implications of what the interpretative approach known as tradition criticism has discovered concerning the development of Old Testament traditions.

Many of the stories constituting the tradition were at first (or later on) transmitted orally, and during other stages, scripturally (cf. Knight 1977:5-20). The process of transmission did not simply involve a mindless copying and reproduction of what was perceived to be unalterable details of inerrant discourse concerning Yahweh. To be sure, the traditions were handed down in dynamic fashion marked by interactive and creative reinterpretation, recontextualisation, recasting and reconstruction (cf. Fishbane 1985:02).

The depiction of the deity Yahweh appears to have been continually reshaped and reinterpreted to meet contemporary theological and psychological needs and to bring it into conformity with present social and political matrices (cf. Fishbane 1985:383-391). Whether one is thinking of the stories about creation, the patriarchs, the exodus, the wanderings in the wilderness, the conquest of Canaan, the period of the monarchy, the exile or the post-exilic period, etc., matters little. Tradition criticism has demonstrated that what we have in the Old Testament are not the unmodified and original versions of these stories (cf. Knight 1977:05; Fishbane 1985:01).

In other words, old scenarios featuring Yahweh were often reinterpreted and reconstructed, the outcome of which has Yahweh being a different sort of deity, saying different things and doing different deeds (cf. Nelson 1981:40). Consequently, when a depiction of Yahweh in any of the traditions is compared with earlier or later versions of itself, the result is not a coherent and harmonisable account of the nature, words and acts of the deity (cf. Alt 1929:04; Cross 1962:11; Moberly 1992:02).

The end result of this transmission process was therefore not one static and monolithic tradition but a plethora of often mutually exclusive traditions resulting from different

adaptations and alterations within the different religious communities (cf. Deist and Du Plessis 1982:66). Whatever the earliest traditions' relation to reality, the amount of adaptation these underwent implies that, whatever the "truth" of the discourse, the scenarios featuring Yahweh never actually happened according to the details to be found in the "final form(s)" of contemporary canonical Old Testament texts (cf. Brueggemann 1997:117).

For those who fail to appreciate the ontological ramifications of these discoveries, the devil's advocate would like to spell out what it translates to in layman's terms. When the text depicts Yahweh as speaking to and interacting with people like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others, it is not providing us with a factual report of actual events. What we encounter in the Old Testament concerning the details of the speeches and acts of Yahweh are, technically speaking, no more than fictitious literary constructs. As such, it represents the ideology of particular religious traditions at a particular point in time. The biblical discourse therefore do not feature what was known to be true but rather what some people considered to be true and what they would like others to believe to be true (cf. also Friedman 1987:192).

Now if one were then to insist that Yahweh as depicted in the text actually does exist, the philosophically minded tradition critic might once again respond with the question "which version?". Even should one make the choice for only a single depiction of Yahweh in the text and ignore all others that contradict it, the problems with realism do not go away. Because the depictions of Yahweh currently featured in the texts are often at odds with themselves as they were articulated during an earlier phase of the transmission process, realism remains problematic. When the history of religion is no longer bracketed by the philosophy of religion, anti-realism seems to be the inevitable result.

The bottom line is therefore that, technically, Yahweh-as-depicted in the details of the particular scenarios in the final form(s) of the traditions is, like the traditions themselves, little more than a literary construct. Since the reinterpreted, reconstructed and reinvented traditions are technically indeed fictitious, it necessarily follows that Yahweh as depicted therein must himself be a character of fiction.

Whatever Yahweh there may be or whatever the supposed extra-textual or intrapsychical referent is that the traditions supposedly bear witness to, this is, for the present at least, beside the point. If the earlier versions of the traditions are in any sense factual then Yahweh-as-depicted in the adapted, modified, recontextualised, reconstructed and reinterpreted current versions of the Old Testament traditions has no corresponding extra-textual counterpart and therefore does not really exist.

#### **2.2.5 The deconstruction of realism via theological pluralism from the perspective of source criticism**

A second means of deconstructing realism from a diachronic point of view involves spelling out the ontological implications of a source-critical explanation for the theological pluralism in the Old Testament. In fact, source-critical analysis has not only uncovered a plethora of sources in the text but has also demonstrated that the various sources often contain conflicting if not contradictory views about Yahweh (cf. Friedman 1987:12; Harwood 1992:02).

According to Friedman (1987:122), many mutually exclusive religious depictions of Yahweh can be abstracted from the various sources in the Pentateuch. For example, in J, E and D, the deity is pictured in very personal ways: moving around on the earth, taking visible forms, engaging in discussion and even debating with humans. In J's account of creation and the flood, the deity personally walks in the garden when it is not too hot, makes clothes for the humans, becomes afraid that they might eat from the tree of life, personally closes the door of the ark, smells Noah's sacrifice and becomes terrified of human potential when the tower of Babylon is built thereafter.

In P, however, we find a more cosmic and transcendent deity. In P's creation and flood stories, for example, Yahweh remains above and beyond, commanding and controlling humans and nature. When later on, Moses strikes the rock at Meribah, Yahweh remains distant in P's story while in E he personally stands on the rock. In J's story of mount Sinai, Yahweh himself descends in fire and speaks face to face with Moses while in P he does not. In J and E Yahweh is actually seen by Moses whilst in P it is impossible to look at Yahweh (cf. Friedman 1987:113).

In J, Abraham can plead with Yahweh over the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and Moses can plead with the deity over the fate of the people in the spy story. In E as well, Moses pleads over the people's fate in the golden calf story and later pleads passionately and eloquently with the deity he has come to know by talking to him as a man with his friend. He can even say to the deity that if he continues to mistreat him as he is doing he might as well kill him. In D, Moses can also plead with Yahweh to let him arrive in the Promised Land but Yahweh refuses. In contrast to such intimate scenarios, P never has humans speaking with the deity in such a manner. In P, Yahweh is transcendent and distant. He simply gives commands and his will is done (cf. Friedman 1987:114-115).

Not to overstate the case, Yahweh is sometimes pictured as personal in P and sometimes as transcendent in J, E and D. But the difference overall is still blatant and profound (cf. Friedman 1987:238). When the redactor combined the sources, he mixed two different and often incompatible views of Yahweh. It involved a juxtaposing of the deity as both universal and distant as well as intensely anthropomorphic and personal. Yahweh was now not only the creator of the universe but also "the god of my father". This fusion was artistically dramatic and theologically profound but involved a balance that none of the sources independently intended (cf. Harwood 1992:143).

There was another even more paradoxical result of such a union of sources. This involved the creation of theological contradictions between Yahweh's justice and his mercy. On the one hand, one finds that P not only depicts Yahweh as distant but also never speaks of Yahweh's mercy. He also never uses words for grace or repentance. Moreover, he never speaks of the faithfulness of Yahweh. Yahweh, according to this depiction, was an unsentimental judge before whom there is no room to beg for mercy.

On the other hand, as Harwood (1992:91) concludes, the deity in J and E is virtually the opposite of his "alter ego" in P. In these latter sources, there is much emphasis on divine mercy and the belief that transgression can be forgiven through repentance. Yahweh is depicted as not only immanent and humanlike but also extremely gracious.

The words that P never mentions occur about seventy times in J, E and D. It is not just a matter of vocabulary. J, E, and D also develop the idea, in contradiction to P, of a merciful deity in all the stories they tell. In these sources, Yahweh often repents of the vengeful acts he intended.

The author of P rejected this view of Yahweh. Stated differently, if Yahweh-as-depicted in J, E and D exists, P might be classified an atheist with regard to that particular deity. The inverse is also true. If the deity of P is real and is the only God, it follows that, since the authors of J, E and D do not believe in that kind of God, with regard to the ontological status of Yahweh (P), they would be anti-realists. Again, though it would be a mistake to draw the line too absolutely between the sources, on the whole, the distinction between Yahweh-as-depicted in the various sources remains apparent and dramatic (cf. Friedman 1987:239).

Moreover, the theological discrepancies are not merely between J, E and D on the one hand and P on the other. Even when, for example, J and E are compared, several theological and ontological dilemmas arise. For instance, the E source appears to be more concerned with the religious ideologies of the Northern Kingdom whilst the J source attempts to legitimise Judean religious beliefs. In an attempt to do so, history-like narratives have been created for theological and ideological purposes (cf. Harwood 1992:75-76). But if this is the case, what shall one think regarding the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in these stories?

Historians and source critics do not spell this out. Yet such analysis often implies that Yahweh's dialogues with Moses (or Noah/Jacob/David) in E (or J for that matter) are fictitious in that they never actually happened as depicted in the text. In other words, Yahweh did not literally appear and spoke and act as the sources depict him as doing. The deity is simply a literary and ideological construct piously injected into otherwise mundane history or fiction to propagate certain religious ideas and to validate later cultic institutions.

The justification for such an anti-realist perspective on the ontological status of Yahweh-as-depicted in the source materials can be found by comparing the theologies of J and E. As Friedman (1987:214) observes, when the deities of J and E are

compared, the god of J and the god of E believed different things regarding what happened in the past. J's Yahweh has a different "biography" than Yahweh in E. Moreover, the god of J relates differently to the world and people than the god of E. There are also serious and substantial discrepancies between the nature of the two deities. They even have different ideas regarding what constitutes normative morality and cultic laws.

Logically then, the deity depicted in J cannot have the same supposed extra-textual counterpart as the deity depicted in E. In fact, it has been suggested that the reason later redactors combined J and E the way they did was because, were the two sources left independent of each other yet side by side, the discrepancies would become too apparent (cf. Friedman 1987:215). This would be intolerable since having texts that contradict each other pertaining to the nature, acts and will of Yahweh would surely discredit the whole business of legitimising later social, political and religious institutions.

Ultimately, however, as Friedman (1987:217) recognises, the combination of P with J, E and D was even more deconstructive of realism than the combination of J and E with each other because P was intentionally *polemical*. Whereas Yahweh-as-depicted in JE would denigrate Aaron and favour Moses, Yahweh-as-depicted in P denigrated Moses and favoured Aaron. While Yahweh in JE held that anyone could be a priest, P's Yahweh insisted that only descendants of Aaron could hold that office. Whereas the Yahweh in JE had angels, made animals talk, had human habits and could be seen by humans, Yahweh-as-depicted in P would have none of that.

D, meanwhile, came from a circle of people who were as hostile to P as the P circle were to JE. These two priestly groups had struggled, over centuries, for priestly prerogatives, authority, income, and legitimacy. Although suspicious, it is therefore hardly surprising that, when the depictions of Yahweh in D and P are compared with each other, one gets the feeling that whatever extra-textual god there may be, these two sources cannot be talking about the same deity. The Yahweh of D endorses the Deuteronomistic beliefs whilst the Yahweh of P favours those of the priestly circle. This is problematic for realism for it suggests that there never was any real Yahweh who did what either P or D claims he did. Rather, the contradicting depictions of the

deity suggest that both the Yahweh of D and the Yahweh of P are fictitious literary constructs created by humans for ideological purposes. Now, someone has put all of these sources together. Henceforth, one finds that realism is deconstructed by the fact that the Yahweh of J is not the Yahweh of E, both of whom cannot be the Yahweh of D who is certainly not the same deity as the Yahweh of P.

The combining of Yahweh's JEDP in R resulted not only in an Old Testament depiction of Yahweh which deconstructs itself because of irreconcilable internal contradictions. As Friedman (1987:222) realises, another outcome of the JEDP hybrid deity of R is that, as a whole, the depiction of Yahweh is now one that neither J nor E nor D nor P ever intended. In addition, it is doubtful that R was cognisant of the chimerical nature of the deity he constructed. The final product is therefore a god who was created by all the authors but who would be unreal to all of them. In other words, when it comes to R's version of the "God-of-the-Old-Testament", J, E, D and P are all, technically speaking, atheists and anti-realists.

When R combined mutually incompatible sources, the authors of which would view each other's theology as unorthodox, the result is thus the deconstruction of realism with regard to the depiction of Yahweh in the final form of the text (R). Given the contradictions regarding the nature and attributes of Yahweh as well as his relation to the world between the various sources, it follows that Yahweh-as-depicted by R with his hybrid deity does not correspond to any extra-textual referent. Yahweh-as-depicted by R does therefore not exist.

From this perspective provided by source-critical analysis, it seems that the claim that atheism did not exist during the time and in the culture of the Old Testament people is only partially true. For the greater part of history, people were accused of being atheists not so much for denying the existence of any god whatsoever but in their refusal to believe in a certain conception of supposed divine reality (cf. Armstrong 1993:02). Thus we find that the early Christians were called atheists as they did not believe in the gods of Roman and Greek mythology. In this sense, some Old Testament authors were also "atheist" in the sense of not believing in the existence of the gods represented by the pagan idols.

If the existence of the pagan deities can be denied, there seems to be good reason to suspect that some people in ancient Israel could have felt the same way about Yahweh-as-depicted in orthodox religious ideology. The same charges Deutero-Isaiah levels at the supposedly insubstantial ontological status of idols are just as conceivable on the lips of those who did not worship Yahweh.

Of course, one should not expect to find many examples of Yahwistic atheism in the Old Testament since the common ideology of all its contributors assumed the reality of Yahweh. Texts in the Psalms where the enemies are depicted as saying that “there is no god” or asking the protagonist “where is your god?” can justifiably be seen as a form of atheism (cf. Pss 14:1 [53:1], 42:4,11). Despite the fact that such denials often appear to be more of a practical sort where not the existence but the activity of the deity is called into question, an interpretation of the particular texts as theoretical atheism is not ruled out all together.

The fact that those denying that there is a god subsequently refer to the deity’s incompetence need not be understood as meaning that such people actually did believe in the existence of the divine but not in its power and influence. Even today, atheists who do not believe any god exists still find the time to use sarcasm and to mock the supposed actions of a particular deity if it were to be assumed that he was real. Seen from this perspective, the claim that there is no god on the lips of the fool may well be seen as expressive of more than practical atheism.

In conclusion, however, the point of this section is not to argue for the existence of absolute atheism in the Old Testament world. Nevertheless, when the sources are delineated, another type of atheism is quite apparent. This is not an absolute atheism but more that of a relative sort. The author of P did not really believe that the god of J was real. Neither did the author of E and D. On the other hand, J would have found Yahweh-as-depicted in P unreal and the same can be said for the relationship between D and E. In this relative sense then, mutually exclusive beliefs about the nature of Yahweh imply a definite atheism on the part of certain sources with regard to the depiction of Yahweh in others.

### 2.2.6 The problem with the idea of an “Old Testament view” of Yahweh

According to devil’s advocate then, given the reality of theological pluralism in the Old Testament (i.e. theological *contradictions as* opposed to mere supplementary and complimentary theological "diversity"), not only is a realist position problematic, thoroughgoing realism is impossible. As a result of contradictions in the text with regard to the nature, will and acts of Yahweh, one cannot be a thoroughgoing and consistent realist even if one wanted to be so (cf. Carroll 1991:85).

In other words, even if one tried and was committed to be a realist pertaining to the entire Old Testament, this would be impossible for the simple fact that pluralism has been canonised (cf. Gunn and Fewell 1993:187). If you opt for certain views of Yahweh in the text, you implicitly deny the validity and veracity of others. This means that even the most conservative of scholars and readers are themselves anti-realists and therefore Yahwistic atheists when it comes to depictions of Yahweh in the text that do not cohere with their orthodox stereotypes (cf. Harwood 1992:157).

Claiming that there is an "Old Testament view” of a certain event, of Yahweh or regarding the will of the deity is as nonsensical and naïve as claiming that there is a New Testament view of Jesus (see Dunn 1977). In the same way New Testament Christianity is pluralist and dispersed with mutually contradicting ideologies, so too the diversity and pluralism of the Old Testament are beyond unification. One can only be a realist by way of repression, ahistorical appropriation, reinterpretation, forced harmonisation and unwarranted selectivity (cf. Cupitt 1991:61).

All attempts at writing a coherent Old Testament theology will always involve generalisation and reductionism of an infinitely complex variety of beliefs and ideological and religious viewpoints that can only make sense to someone without knowledge of the history of religion that underlies such ideas. Without a centre and with a host of different and mutually exclusive beliefs, realism with regard to the ontological status of the character Yahweh-as-depicted in the text becomes endlessly problematic (cf. Brueggemann 1997:38).

Not only is Yahweh's extra-textual existence suspect, the very concept of "Yahweh" is itself problematic. Which version of Yahweh are we talking about? Which depiction of him is assumed to be normative? Which tradition provides us with the facts? Which stage in the history of transmission provides us with the best access to what is actually the case? Which source material corresponds the most with a supposed extra-textual state of affairs? How is the choice for certain depictions and the bracketing of others justified? How can Yahweh-as-depicted in the Old Testament exist when there is no Old Testament view of Yahweh as such but only many more or less mutually exclusive representations of the deity?

Of course, some conservative theologians will insist that there are not really contradictions at all (cf. Archer 1982:1-5; Arndt 1982:02). It will be claimed that the discrepancies exist only in the mind of the devil's advocate. A close reading should adequately take cognisance of the context of each text and remember that God and, therefore, the Bible cannot contradict itself (cf. Kaiser et al. 1996:3-4). According to this view, all alleged contradictions are only apparent but not real – harmonisation is always possible, if not compulsory.

As Hanson & Hanson (1989:39) recognise, the conservative apologists have numerous rhetorical strategies in place in order to deal with the contradictions. Through ad hoc theories, speculation and conjecture. They will no doubt attempt to harmonise all the contradictions provided by the devil's advocate. Of course, these people do have a right to their opinion. However, as far as the devil's advocate is concerned, the arguments of conservatives are riddled with fallacies (cf. also Barr 1981:72; Cameron 1987:143; Hanson 1989:39).

Typical examples of informal fallacies in conservative apologetical literature include circular reasoning, begging the question, unwarranted assumptions, groundless conjectures, dogmatic eisegesis, economy with the truth, *ad hoc* rationalisation and *ad hominem* reasoning (cf. McKinsey 1995:22-37; Engel 1986:83-231).

Moreover, as Barr (1981, 1984) has convincingly argued, it would seem that these people are more interested in preserving a particular dogma regarding the supposed nature and inspiration of the text than they are in ascertaining what the contents of the

texts actually consist of. Contra Archer (1982:14), conservatives seldom attempt to appropriate the nature of the Old Testament by ascertaining the meaning of the discourse on its own terms and in its original context. The devil's advocate, therefore, does not consider the fundamentalist response to the problem of theological contradictions to be a satisfactory solution to the ontological dilemmas facing realism.

Another possible objection to the atheist implications as spelled out by the devil's advocate can be seen in the claim that contradictions in the Old Testament's depictions of Yahweh are to be expected when fallible humans talk about transcendent divine mysteries (cf. Carroll 1991:32; Clines 1995:35). It might even be suggested that a concern with contradictions is symptomatic of pedantry or involves a failure to appreciate the supposed "metaphorical" nature of the Old Testament's religious language (cf. Caird 1993:1-3).

This view has been particularly influential in contemporary Old Testament scholarship, especially along the lines popularised by the work of MacFague (1983). In the context of the Old Testament discourse, however, the claim that *everything* is metaphor involves both repression and sweeping generalisation. Contra Fretheim (1984:2-5), Brueggemann (1997:47-49) and Gibson (1998:22ff), on reading the Old Testament critically, it is far from obvious that all its religious language about Yahweh was originally intended to function metaphorically.

It is true that many of the references to Yahweh in the *poetic* sections which refer to the deity a "rock", a "shepherd", a "fortress" or "hiding his face", stretching out his "hand", etc. have been intended to be understood as involving metaphorical discourse. Be that as it may, the same cannot be said of the God-talk in much of the *narrative* discourse (cf. Balentine 1983:107).

When, in the Yahwist's stories of the Pentateuch, the deity is said to have human form and to exhibit human emotions it is clear from the immediate context that the author(s) intended this to be understood quite literally. Examples of such apparently literally intended God-talk include such scenarios as where Yahweh is depicted as speaking with Adam and Even in the Garden (cf. Gen 3). Also included are the depictions of the deity partaking in a meal before engaging Abraham in a theodicy

debate (cf. Gen 18). And what about the incident in which Yahweh wrote down the law with his “finger” before some tense moments of heated interchange with Moses? (cf. Ex 31-32). Reading these stories without the need to make them acceptable for modern theological sensibilities it should be obvious that such types of discourse were initially intended to be read as literal account of actual events.

Are we really to suppose that the author of Genesis 1, as opposed to modern and post-modern theologians, believed that the world was created metaphorically by a metaphorical god? Was it metaphorically flooded via metaphorical divine anger (cf. Gen 6-9)? If the text says Yahweh went down to look at the tower of Babylon in Genesis 11, how was this initially intended as metaphor? Were we supposed to think that Jacob wrestled metaphorically all night with a metaphorical man (cf. Gen 32:22-33)? Did the author of Genesis 18 believe that Abraham was metaphorically bartering about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah with a metaphorical entity?

When the text depicts Moses and the elders eating a meal and looking at Yahweh and his feet on a sapphire pavement, in what sense would the first audience have read this as metaphorical discourse (cf. Ex 24)? Are we actually supposed to think that Moses was almost killed on the way back to Egypt by a metaphorical avenging deity (cf. Ex 4:23-26)? Did the author of the Job story want us to think that Job’s family was metaphorically killed by the command of a metaphorical god (cf. Job 1-2; 42)? Did Jonah flee to Tarsus to escape the metaphorical presence of a metaphorical deity who stopped him by metaphorically sending a fish to swallow him (cf. Jon 1-2)?

As Hebblethwaite (1988:18) asks, “If *all* God-talk is metaphorical, what are these metaphors supposed to refer to?” What is that phenomenon (metaphorically called “God”) that can only be spoken of in metaphors? What is the difference between a god about whom we cannot really say anything literal and no god at all? How could a metaphorical entity be considered to be personal as well? If everything to the last word is metaphorical rather than literally true, does that mean Yahweh also only “exists” metaphorically but not literally?

Contemporary philosophers of religion have come up with many theories regarding the nature of religious language (cf. Hick 1993:11-29). On the one hand, it should be

noted that the idea of religious language being metaphorical is but one of many competing theories. One will also encounter views claiming that religious language is not metaphorical but symbolical (Tillich), analogical (Aquinas), non-cognitive (Randall, Braithwaite, Phillips), meaningless (Ayer), models of transcendence (Ramsey), mythical (Bultmann), anti-realist (Cupitt), etc. (cf. Hick 1993:19-29).

On the other hand, it should never be forgotten – as many Old Testament scholars seem to be prone to do – these theories, including the idea of religious language as being metaphorical, were devised with the discourse of Christian philosophical theology in mind. Such philosophical theology did indeed contain references and allusions to biblical imagery but these had already undergone a long period of reinterpretation and decontextualisation following early Hellenistic Christian allegorical interpretation and the rise of sophisticated philosophical theology since Augustine. Such theorising was for the most part an attempt to make sense of the discourse of post-biblical religious creeds and not based on an in-depth analysis of the discourse of Old Testament texts (cf. Nineham 1976:44-59).

The devil's advocate, therefore, cannot help but wonder whether what motivates the belief among Old Testament scholars that all God-talk in the text is metaphorical is, in fact, nothing more than the same repressed aversion to the literal meaning that once popularised the allegorical approach to the text. In both cases, the theory assists in facilitating readings more acceptable to contemporary cultural and theological sensibilities.

The devil's advocate thus feels justified to consider the appeal to the supposed metaphorical nature of all Old Testament God-talk as being the liberal theologian's counterpart to the dogmatic and apologetical eisegesis of conservatives. In the same way conservative theologians read into the text their orthodox theological doctrines to salvage theological realism as they see it, the belief in the metaphorical nature of religious language allows critical scholars a similar liberty.

While critical scholars in general have no problem with being explicit about the problems, fiction, absurdities and contradictions in biblical texts, their belief that the discourse were intended to be metaphorical allows them to circumvent the anti-realist

implications of admitting the flaws of what is supposed to be Holy Writ. Thus they repress the atheistic implications of accepting the all-too-human nature of the text and evade its consequences by inserting the fine print about its supposed metaphorical base which, they believe, lessens and deconstructive effects of intra- and inter-textual discrepancies.

In sum, the theory of the supposed metaphorical nature of all God-talk, in terms of its bearing on the present issue of concern (i.e. theological pluralism) is not only presumptuous but also misleading. As such it fails miserably as part of the desperate attempt of realists to deal with the dilemma presented by the crude and often literally intended pluralist discourse of the Old Testament in a valid manner.

A related albeit slightly different way of dealing with theological pluralism involves the claim that there is nothing to worry about since the discrepancies are merely the result of fallible human perspectives on ineffable divine reality (cf. Carroll 1991:39).

Once again, the devil's advocate considers this view to be yet another subtle evasion of the actual problematic. Though it is technically true that humans wrote the text, this masked apologetic strategy distorts the issue currently under consideration. What is conveniently ignored is the fact that the texts containing the words and acts of Yahweh never present themselves as fallible human perspectives to which alternatives may very well exist. What we are faced with are actually contradictory accounts of Yahweh's words and acts as these are recounted even when the deity himself is depicted as speaking in the first person (cf. Harwood 1992:88).

Of course, one can snigger at the naiveté of this observation. However, should one insist that even in such cases the *ipsissima verba* of Yahweh are actually the words put into the divine character's mouth by human speechwriters, what is this but a tacit admittance that the discourse is technically fictitious anyway? If Yahweh never actually said what the texts depict him as saying, does this not mean that, whatever God there may be, technically, Yahweh as thus depicted is a character of fiction?

Then again, some apologists for realism might appeal to the concept of “progressive

revelation” in an attempt to make sense of the discrepancies (cf. Haley 1992:10,12,27 and passim). Once again, however, the devil's advocate considers this appeal to be unsatisfactory as an attempt to salvage realism.

First of all, as was the case in the previous attempt to salvage realism, the appeal to the concept of progressive revelation distorts the problematic by pretending that the texts intended to present us with fallible human perspectives of the divine which would obviously need to be modified over time. Those who accept the idea of progressive revelation therefore need to repress the fact that, from the beginning, what the texts presents about Yahweh is implied to be the normative perspective of the deity himself and not the imperfect perspective of mortals (cf. Harwood 1992:117).

A popular example where the apologetic of progressive revelation has been frequently applied can be found in theologians' attempts to explain and justify the Old Testament's ideas on the concept of “holy war” (cf. Deist 1986:22). Not a few believers with post-biblical cultural sensibilities have cringed at the commands of Yahweh in the Old Testament to destroy the cities of other peoples and to kill everyone therein, including women and children.

However, because there seems to be a development in the Old Testament itself regarding what was involved in such warfare, many scholars have gladly pointed to this fact to claim that holy war is indeed reprehensible. It is alleged that Israel, as a product of its socio-cultural and historical context at first believed that the holy war was what Yahweh expected of them. Eventually, by the time of the New Testament, Yahweh's true nature was revealed in Jesus who showed that Yahweh is actually a god of perfect love who does not like violence (cf. Deist 1986:34-36).

Such a view, though theologically satisfying, is also problematic. The Old Testament never presents its views regarding the holy war as merely Israel's ideas about what Yahweh supposedly commands. From the beginning, what is said about the issue comes directly from the mouth of Yahweh himself. And this is the main dilemma for the theory of progressive revelation: the contradictions are not merely present in the human ideas about Yahweh but, if we take the text seriously, in the views of the deity himself. Theologians who argue that the contradictions are not problematic must

overlook the fact that, according to the text it is the deity and not the humans who speaks with a forked tongue (cf. Harwood 1992:75-76).

Once again, those who do endorse the idea of progressive revelation might think that the way this objection to the idea has been articulated implies a certain naiveté on the part of the devil's advocate. After all, even when the text presents something as the word of Yahweh it is still humans who put those words in his mouth (cf. Carroll 1991:37; Clines 1995:155). Be that as it may, it is somewhat strange that this fact makes the matter any less problematic from an ontological point of view.

Does the fact that the words of Yahweh are actually the words humans attribute to him implicative of a belief that Yahweh thus did not really utter those words? If this is the case then the dilemma is as great as ever since it implies that the Yahweh depicted as uttering such commands is indeed a character of fiction and does not exist. However, if it is not the case and Yahweh did command it, then either the deity himself softened as time passed or later representations must be fictitious. Since those who believe in progressive revelation usually believe that Yahweh was always loving and that the later views of him are closer to reality than the former it is unlikely that this alternative will be accepted either (cf. Haley 1992:171).

In sum then, the first dilemma for those who adhere to the theory of progressive revelation is the fact that, from the beginning, what is abhorrent and obscene is never presented as being merely a human interpretation of a partially revealed divine will. What the texts pretend to be are often nothing less than the views of Yahweh himself speaking in the first person. If it is claimed that technically it was not really Yahweh who said such and so but a dialogue created for him by a human author, what is this but a tacit admittance that Yahweh-as-depicted – i.e. voicing unorthodox ideas – is a character of fiction with no extra-textual counterpart?

The second objection to the idea of progressive revelation is that the concept is distortive of the way religious beliefs of different periods in Old Testament history relate to each other. This relation is often presented as one in which later views merely supplement the partial truths of earlier revelation. The whole process is therefore perceived to be cumulative as Yahweh reveals ever more about himself, his

nature and his will.

The problem with this construct is that it is simply incorrect. The fact of the matter, as was demonstrated previously in this chapter, is that much of earlier alleged divine revelation is not *supplemented* but *contradicted* by later alleged revelation. The image of linear and cumulative progression is less appropriate than what may be seen as “paradigm shifts” in the history of the religious beliefs of Old Testament times. This is true concerning all the traditional theological loci, e.g. protology, theology proper, ethics, eschatology, thanatology, demonology, etc. (cf. Harwood 1992:72).

In other words, contrary to what the idea of *progressive* revelation *prima facie* implies, the various religious beliefs/revelations were not merely supplemented as time went on. Instead, alleged divine revelation was often discarded, reinterpreted, deconstructed and contradicted by what was later also alleged to be divine revelation.

Finally, contra Hanson & Hanson (1989:22), any objection to the way in which the contradictions in the biblical texts were utilised in this chapter, based on the view that the Old Testament is not a textbook of theology, is equally inadequate as an attempt to salvage realism. Though it is true that the discourse of the Old Testament texts is not presented in the format of propositional systematic theological discourse and is not constituted by sophisticated philosophical argumentation, this fact regarding the nature of the text’s rhetoric is irrelevant (cf. also Barr 1999:137).

To be sure, if the untheological nature of the discourse is actually taken to imply the presence of fiction, contradiction and unorthodox views in the text, then this apologetic position, instead of salvaging realism, actually provides yet another argument in favour of anti-realism.

### 2.3 CONCLUSION

It is important from a philosophical-critical perspective not merely to note the problematic of theological pluralism and then to bracket possible ontological implications. In this regard, the following line of reasoning indicates what the ontological implications may be given the reality of contradictory depictions of

Yahweh in the Old Testament.

1. When the texts, traditions and sources of the Old Testament are analysed comparatively, it is clear that there are contradictory depictions of Yahweh in the text pertaining to his nature, acts and will.
2. Logically, if this is the case then not all the depictions can possibly refer to the same allegedly real entity.
3. Even if realism could somehow be justified with regard to at least one of the depictions then all those depictions that contradict it must be fictitious.
4. If that is the case then Yahweh-as-depicted in such representations must himself be a character of fiction.
5. If this is the case then Yahweh as thus depicted does not really exist.

The argument from deconstructive theological pluralism is the first argument in the case against realism. Since the case itself constitutes a cumulative argument against the existence of Yahweh, the particular argument reconstructed in this chapter should not be appropriated in isolation. Taken by itself, it does not yet justify thoroughgoing anti-realism. All that has thus far been established is that, given the presence of contradictions in the depictions of Yahweh in the text, at least some of the representations have no bearing on supposed extra-textual reality.